Banned Books Mini Review

JULIE OF THE WOLVES

Author: Jean Craighead George
Original date and place of publication: 1972, New York
Publisher: Harper and Row
Literary form: Adolescent fiction

SUMMARY

Miyax lives where few people could put themselves and expect to survive. Yet her heritage, lineage, and will serve her well as she fights to stay alive in the Alaskan tundra with no food, no weapon for defense, and no human companionship.

Miyax, or Julie, as she is called by the Gussak (whites), is the young daughter of Kapugen, a wise and well-respected Eskimo hunter, and a mother she barely knew. Kapugen is devastated when his wife dies, but he takes over Miyax's upbringing, showing her the ways of the wilderness in which they live. It is here where Kapugen feels most at ease, and he finds great satisfaction being able to teach Miyax about the ways of the land. Summers at the seal camp with Mekoryuk (their people) are fondly remembered and appreciated by Miyax. These end abruptly when Kapugen's aunt Martha comes to take Miyax into her custody to enroll her in school and marry her to Daniel (a marriage which had been arranged since birth, a common practice with most Mekoryuk). Though distraught, Miyax is also curious about her new lifestyle.

Kapugen is shaken by the abrupt loss of the bond that had developed with Miyax; he leaves the seal camp, never to be seen again.When Miyax meets her new husband, Daniel, she immediately gathers that he is mentally challenged. Fortunately, Nusan, Daniel's mother, explains to Miyax that her primary role need not be as wife, but rather to help with the household chores. Comfortably adjusting to her new lifestyle, Miyax makes friends, learns to read and write, does chores, and corresponds with Amy, her new pen pal whom she meets through Pearl, a villager. These changes help Miyax cope with her new lifestyle, but an unwelcome element that has surfaced is the drinking and the emotional and verbal abuse from Naka, Nusan's husband. Then Daniel attempts to rape Miyax:

"They're laughing at me. That's what's wrong. They say, 'Ha, ha. Dumb Daniel. He's got a wife and he can't mate her. Ha.' " He pulled her to her feet and pressed his lips against her mouth. She pulled away.

"They're laughing," he repeated, and tore her dress from her shoulder. She clutched it and pulled away. Daniel grew angry. He tripped her and followed her to the floor. His lips curled back and his tongue touched her mouth. Crushing her with her body, he twisted her down onto the floor. He was as frightened as she.

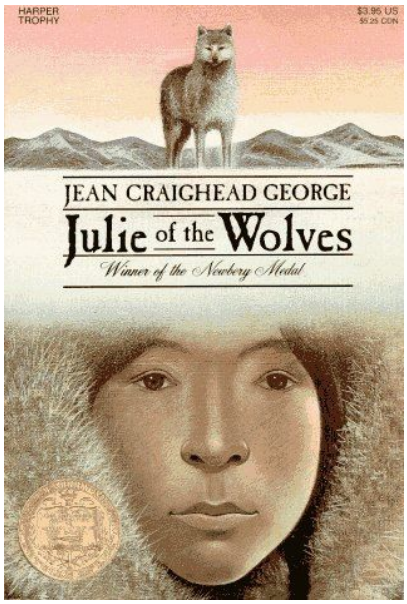
The room spun and grew blurry. Daniel cursed, kicked violently, and lay still. Suddenly he got to his feet and ran out of the house. "Tomorrow, tomorrow I can, can, can, ha ha," he bleated piteously.

Miyax suddenly packs and heads toward San Francisco. On the journey, hungry, tired, and many miles from any kind of human civilization, Miyax finds herself in a predicament that challenges her to call forth all of Kapugen's teachings (now five years past) in order to survive. Besides battling these elements, she must also deal with a pack of wolves that have migrated into her proximity. Miyax realizes that alone she cannot live off the land; she remembers Kapugen telling her that he once called upon a wolfpack in order to live:

The very life in her body, its spark and warmth, depended upon these wolves for survival. One year [Kapugen] had camped near a wolf den on a hunt. When a month passed and her father had seen no game, he told the leader of the wolves that he was hungry and needed food. The next night the wolf called him from far away and her father went to him and found a

Banned Books Mini Review

freshly killed caribou. Unfortunately, Miyax's father never explained to her how he had told the wolf of his needs.



Patiently, Miyax begins a vigil of watching the wolves, picking up their every mannerism, behavior, and action. She also names them: Amoroq, the mighty black leader; Silver, his mate; Nails, another male; Jelly, the misfit male often shunned by the others; and the pups, Kapu, Zip, Zing, and Zat. They cautiously grow used to her, eventually accept her as a nonthreatening member, and allow her to share in the kill. Miyax has conquered the barrier that separates human from beast by gaining the pack's trust and respect. Now upbeat and rejuvenated, she gladly continues her journey toward civilization and her friend Amy, and away from the life on the tundra. Miyax's journey climaxes as she reaches the outposts of human civilization. Steel barrel markers she now regularly sees signal the not-distant coast and her final stop where she will be freed from her lonely status. Her path is abruptly altered, though, when a plane containing poaching "hunters," who are looking for an easy shot, strike Amoroq dead with rifle fire. Kapu, the heir to Amoroq's throne, is also injured in the assault. Miyax realizes that without a strong leader, the pack will die. She decides that her role now must be to nurse Kapu back to health and provide for the pack until he is able to do so, just as they did for her. Amy and San Francisco will have to wait.

Having regained his strength and established himself as leader, Kapu is once again able to provide for the pack without Miyax's aid. She has repaid her gratitude and, in the process, has decided to remain in the wilderness, where her soul is embedded with Amoroq's. The "hunters" who stole her friend's life are a clear reminder that she has changed too much to fit in with her human counterparts. She is a wolf at heart, as is evidenced by her song:

Amoroq, wolf, my friend,
You are my adopted father.
My feet shall run because of you.
My heart shall beat because of you.
And I shall love because of you.

One day Miyax encounters a hunter—the first human she has actually seen face-to-face for quite some time. It is Atik, an Englishman, who invites Miyax to meet his wife, Uma, and child, Sorqaq. Through conversation, Miyax discovers that Kangik, the village in which Atik lived after his grandfather died, was tutored by a wise and highly respected man named Kapugen, who had surfaced there some time beforehand. Bewildered with joy and curiosity, Miyax wonders how her father is. Has he changed? Will he remember her? Can he explain his disappearance? These questions become answers, which serve to help stabilize the recent difficulties in Miyax's life.

CENSORSHIP HISTORY

Parents from the city of Mexico, Missouri, specifically cite reasons of political censorship as their primary concern with *Julie of the Wolves*. Complaints citing "socialist, communist, evolutionary and anti-family themes," as well as nonconforming religious themes, were launched against the book in June 1982. These arguments were not supported with specific details from the book, but rather with vague generalizations. The book was reviewed by the school board and retained. This mirrors statistics provided by The Missouri Censorship Survey, conducted by the Missouri Coalition Against Censorship, which showed that in school districts where written complaint policies were established, only 2 percent of books challenged were removed; in contrast, a 35 percent removal rate resulted in districts where policies were

Banned Books Mini Review

not established. A sixth-grade classroom in Littleton, Colorado, was the venue of 1994 for a challenge against *Julie of the Wolves,* which deemed the content of the book inappropriate for those students in the sixth grade and lower. Parents claimed that the issues of alcoholism, abuse, and divorce would be "better suited for older students." The school board, after reviewing the text, voted to keep it on the shelf. As one member put it simply: "It is important people see the other side of life."

A case from Chandler, Arizona, in 1994 concerned the use of the text by Julie Hardy to instruct third through fifth graders in an Antarctic studies unit. At issue was not the content of the book in terms of its accurate portrayal of the Eskimo lifestyle, but rather one scene in particular where Miyax is sexually assaulted by her young husband, who feels peer pressure to consummate the marriage. Although the teacher had previewed the book, this scene escaped her notice. Parents felt it alone was enough to deem the book inappropriate. The principal felt that the book might be appropriate for fifth graders "with explanation," but not for younger ages. The book was voluntarily pulled off the shelves pending a principal's meeting, whose outcome is unknown.

Palmdale School District in Southern California was another site where the questionable scene of rape and sexual assault came to the forefront. In December 1995, parents requested the book be removed due to the nature of the scene. Prior to the challenge, however, the book received rigorous attention before it was ever shelved in the school. It was reviewed by no less than three professional and local review boards, including the English Language Arts Curriculum Committee and the PSD Library Review Committee. As the book came under fire, the review committee cited merit in a study of two cultures (American and Eskimo), Miyax's problem-solving ability and the present values of respect, responsibility, and persistence. The Palmdale Materials Reevaluations Committee, after listening to the objection and reviewing the text, decided that compliance was met with the adopting procedures for the library, and that the book was more appropriate and age-protected for grade seven.

The so-identified rape scene was objected to in Cromwell, New York (1980), and in the New Brighton Area School District, Pennsylvania (1996), where it was described as a "graphic marital rape scene," and in Ramona, California (1996). In New Brighton, the challenge was successful in that the book was removed from the curriculum but retained in the library. In Ramona, the challenger's daughter was given an alternative assignment. The district created a community task force that in January 1998 issued a publication, identifying books that would be "required" and those that would be optional "recommended." *Julie of the Wolves* was placed in the latter category, followed by an asterisk, designating books that "may contain material of concern to some individuals." In 2003–04, in accordance with California state standards a new core literature list was promulgated; *Julie of the Wolves* was recommended for grades 6 through 8 rather than required.

FURTHER READING

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—Eric P. Schmidt

Banned Books Mini Review

IT Can't Happen Here

Author: Sinclair Lewis
Original date and place of publication: 1935, United States
Publisher: Doubleday, Doran and Company
Literary form: Novel

SUMMARY

The "it" in the title, *It Can't Happen Here*, refers to fascism. More exactly, it represents the overthrow of the American republic by a duly elected president and the institution of a totalitarian regime. The book begins in 1936.

The country is swinging into its presidential-nominating activities. The primary setting is the rural community of Fort Beulah, Vermont. Doremus Jessup, central protagonist and moral-political conscience of the novel, is the still vital but aging and relatively prosperous editor of the Fort Beulah Daily Informer. His son is a lawyer in Boston; his elder daughter, herself a community leader, is married to a competent doctor; and his younger daughter, a feminist and aspiring architect, is in her last year of high school. Jessup is politically liberal, intellectually honest, and probing; locally he is considered "a pretty smart fella but kind of a cynic."

In the early pages of the novel, the reader is introduced to the issues and conservative opinions of the day, which are anathema to Jessup, the first group spoken by General H. Y. Edgeways, USA (ret.), and the last two by acquaintances: 1) the defense budget—to "defend our shores against all the alien gangs of international racketeers that call themselves 'governments' "; 2) unions, war, and communism—"I do abhor war, yet there are worse things. . . . a state of so-called peace in which labor organizations are riddled, as by plague germs, with insane notions out of anarchist Red Russia"; 3) pacifism—"a sickeningly big percentage of students were blatant pacifists"; 4) prejudice—"we ought to keep all these foreigners out of the country, and what I mean, the Kikes just as much as the Wops and Hunkies and Chinks"; and 5) the poor and relief— "these are serious times—maybe twenty-eight million on relief, and beginning to get ugly—thinking they've got a vested right now to be supported."

The reader is also introduced to Senator Berzelius "Buzz" Windrip, a self-promoting and outrageously deceitful political chameleon and opportunist. As a candidate for the Democratic nomination, he steamrolls the convention and defeats Franklin D. Roosevelt after many ballots to win the nomination. His campaign proclamation, "The Fifteen Points of Victory for the Forgotten Men," includes these excerpts:

(1) All finance in the country, including banking, insurance, stocks and bonds and mortgages, shall be under the absolute control of a Federal Central Bank, owned by the government and conducted by a Board. . . . [which] shall consider the nationalization and government-ownership, for the Profit of the Whole People, of all mines, oilfields, water power, public utilities, transportation, and communication.

(2) The President shall appoint a commission, equally divided between manual workers, employers, and representatives of the Public, to determine which Labor Unions are qualified to represent the Workers. . . .

(4) We shall guarantee to all persons absolute freedom of religious worship, provided, however, that no atheist, agnostic, believer in Black Magic, nor any Jew who shall refuse to

swear allegiance to the New Testament, nor any person of any faith who refuses to take the Pledge to the Flag, shall be permitted to hold any public office or to practice as a teacher. . .

(5) Annual net income per person shall be limited to $500,000. No accumulated fortune may at any one time exceed $3,000,000 per person. . . .

(7) Our armaments and the size of our military and naval establishments shall be consistently enlarged until they shall equal, but—since this country has no desire for foreign conquest of any kind—not surpass, in every branch of the forces of defense, the martial strength of any other single country or empire in the world. . . .

(10) All Negroes shall be prohibited from voting, holding public office, practicing law, medicine, or teaching in any class above the grade of grammar school, and they shall be taxed 100 percent of all sums in excess of $10,000 per family per year. . . .

(12) All women now employed shall, . . . except in such peculiarly feminine spheres of activity as nursing and beauty parlors, be assisted to return to their incomparably sacred duties as home-makers and as mothers. . . .

(13) Any person advocating Communism, Socialism, or Anarchism, advocating refusal to enlist in case of war, or advocating alliance with Russia . . . shall be subject to trial for high treason. . . .

(15) Congress shall, immediately upon our inauguration, initiate amendments to the Constitution providing (a) that the President shall have the authority to institute and execute all necessary measures for the conduct of the government during this critical epoch; (b) that Congress shall serve only in an advisory capacity, . . . (c) that the Supreme Court shall immediately have removed from its jurisdiction the power to negate, . . . any or all acts of the President, his duly appointed aides, or Congress.

Windrip is elected; his pledge of several thousand dollars a year to every person in the country as part of his redistribution-of-wealth promise effectively brings in the vote. Among his first acts is a special message to Congress demanding the instant passage of a bill giving him complete control of legislation and execution as well as removing from the Supreme Court all capability of blocking his actions. When this demand is rejected, Windrip proclaims a state of martial law; he also acts immediately to arm the Minute Men (initially organized as unpaid volunteers to march in parades but increasingly encouraged and licensed to model the Nazi blackshirts), who then arrest and jail congressmen who resist. Despite riots around the country and in Washington, D.C., "bloodily put down by the Minute Men," the president maintains his power.

Predictably, the situation worsens. Political parties are abolished; only the corporate or corporative state (nicknamed the "Corpo" and its agents, the "Corpos") exists. The states and their governments are also abolished, replaced by provinces subdivided into districts; their officials are appointed. Unemployed workers are sent to labor camps with their families; work is found for them at a dollar a day on state projects and in private industry. And concentration camps are established to commemorate Windrip's birthday.

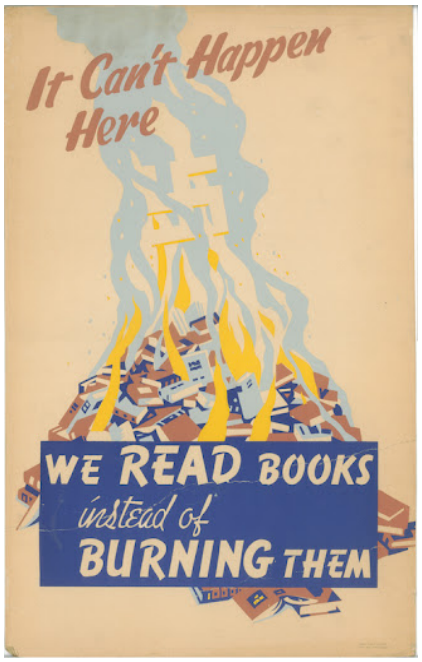
The kind-hearted government was fed-up, and the country was informed that, from this day, on, any person who by word or act sought to harm or discredit the State, would be executed

Banned Books Mini Review

or interned. Inasmuch as the prisons were already too full, both for these slanderous criminals and for the persons whom the kind-hearted State had to guard by "protective arrest," there were immediately to be opened, all over the country, concentration camps.

The lives of the Jessup family change dramatically when Doremus drops his wait-and-see stance and writes an editorial condemning the tyranny of the Windrip administration. The next morning, the newspaper office is mobbed; Jessup is arrested, jailed, mistreated, and summarily tried for "criminal libel and conveying secret information to alien forces and high treason and homicidal incitement to violence." He is released on parole so he can train the former school superintendent, now a Corpo, to run the newspaper. At the moment of sentencing, his son-in-law doctor, outraged, forces himself into the courtroom and protests disrespectfully. The judge orders the doctor shot; within moments he is dead.

Fear settles like heavy fog around the Jessups and the country as they watch changes enacted and freedoms sharply eclipsed. Secret news of individuals and groups bullied and slaughtered by terrorists begins to circulate. After an attempt to escape to Canada fails, Doremus becomes involved in the New Underground (NU), a partisan activity headquartered in Canada. His underground station, which receives news of Corpo activities and tyrannies, prints and distributes leaflets as part of an attempt to undermine the Corpo administration and prepare citizens for revolt. The cell, however, is discovered, and its members are sent to concentration camps. There they are repeatedly beaten and brutalized. Eventually, after he has all but given up hope, Doremus escapes with the help of a bribed guard. He is transported to Canada, where he joins the New Underground movement.



Meanwhile back in Washington, D.C., President Windrip has isolated himself, having become increasingly fearful of both shadows and reality. And well he should be. After two years in office, about the time Jessup is helped to escape from the concentration camp, Windrip is deposed and exiled by his longtime, loyal right-hand man whom he had appointed secretary of state. This coup d'état shocks the idealists among the Corpos and the Minute Men, as do the flippant governmental style and Romanesque White House parties of the new president. Soon the secretary of war marches into the White House with selected storm troops, assassinates the president, and declares himself to that office. The nation's situation worsens.

In 1939, the United States declares war on Mexico, seemingly to distract Americans from the misery and deprivation at home. At the same time, a popular rebellion against the Corpo regime rises up in the United States, initially in the north-central and northwestern areas with large patches elsewhere in the country joining. At this time, too, Doremus Jessup returns to the United States via Minnesota as a new underground leader, in charge of some 60 other agents.

Comparison to the events and affairs of Nazi Germany is not left to reader imagination; the author provides references to these affairs as well as admiring comments from Windrip and other Corpos. A less direct comment near the conclusion suggests Lewis's deeper concern about the state of the American mind and psyche in relation to the rising concern about the politics of Europe.

But there the revolt halted, because in America, which had so warmly praised itself for its "widespread popular free education," there had been so very little education, widespread, popular, free, or anything else, that most people did not know what they wanted—indeed knew about so few things to want at all.

Banned Books Mini Review

CENSORSHIP HISTORY

Despite a "bureaucratic" disclaimer from Dr. Frank L. Tolman, head of the New York Library Extension Service, that the service since 1930 did not have the right to approve or disapprove books for school libraries, its library commission had "suggested eliminating some books not as closely connected with the curriculum as others." According to Tolman, the commission had responded to requests from school librarians for assistance. *It Can't Happen Here* was one of those eliminated. John Tebbel reports that the New York World-Telegram headline read, "School Bars Lewis' Book Also Broun's— Others Kept Off Library Shelves by State Disapproval." (The Heywood Broun book referred to is Thunder over the Bronx; Robert Graves's I, Claudius was also listed.)

Tebbel focuses attention on the 1936 proposed film version of *It Can't Happen Here*: "The American Civil Liberties Union reported that . . . in Hollywood, *It Can't Happen Here* was having as difficult a time in its movie version as the book had endured, and for the same reasons—the authoritarian belief that authoritarianism could not happen in America." The controversy emerged when Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM), which had acquired the rights to the novel, announced that production had been postponed indefinitely; according to Louis B. Mayer, cost was the factor. Sinclair Lewis, however, citing a telegram from his agent with official information, indicated that the studio's action resulted fromWill H. Hays's forbidding the production on the grounds of "fear of international politics and fear of boycotts abroad." Lewis argued further that Hays would "probably base the suppression on the ground that the film industry is opposed to using the motion pictures for controversial politics." (Hays administered the Motion Picture Production Code, commonly referred to as the Hays office.) Lewis also attributed Hays's action to domestic political concerns: uncertainty of how the election would develop and not wanting to offend the Republicans. The director of the Production Code Administration, Joseph I. Breen, Hays's assistant, attacked *It Can't Happen Here* as too "anti-fascist."

Though Hays and his spokespersons denied the order to ban the film, Sidney Howard, who wrote the screen adaptation, produced a memorandum from Breen that suggested the elimination of sections of the script because they were "so inflammatory in nature and so filled with dangerous material." Howard noted that Hays didn't "ban" the film; he "just talked the producers out of it."
Doubleday, the novel's publisher, entered the fray with an advertisement in the *New York Times,* charging censorship and asserting "It is happening here." The controversy doubled the sale of the book.

In 1937, upon the translation of the book into German, it was banned in Germany. In 1954, all of Sinclair Lewis's books were banned in East Berlin.

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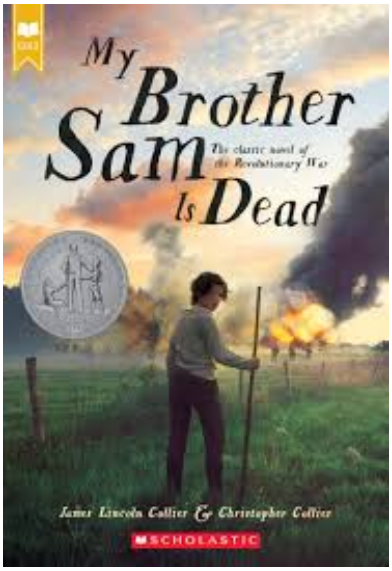
Banned Books Mini Review

MY BROTHER SAM IS DEAD

Authors: James Lincoln Collier and Christopher Collier
Original date and place of publication: 1974, United States
Publisher: Four Winds Press
Literary form: Novel

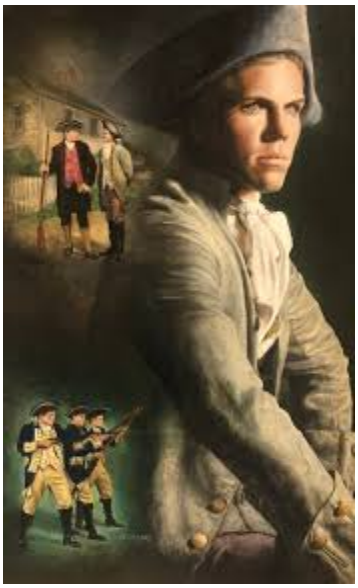
Summary



The action of My Brother Sam Is Dead centers on the Meekers, a Connecticut village family during and after the American Revolution. The Meeker family's loyalties are divided—as are those of the community, the father being a Tory but promoting a neutral stance, anxious to protect his family and his livelihood. The elder son, Sam, drops out from college to join the rebel forces, leaving young Tim, the narrator, uncertain about whom and what to support. The emotional tensions and battlefield violence cause Tim to reconsider his values and political position over the span of the novel, from 1775 to 1778.

Disputes in the family—politics and relationships—upset its dynamics. Sam desires acknowledgment of his decision to fight with the Patriots; his father rejects this and demands that Sam remove his uniform and return to college or not come home. Sam requests the use of the family's Brown Bess during the war, the family's only gun, and is denied. He steals it. When Tim questions his father's decision in another instance, Mr. Meeker insists on Tim's obedience.

Disputes between the Tories, the colonists loyal to the king, and the Patriots, those loyal to the Continental Congress and the war effort, increase enmity between them. The war comes to the family and the community. A rebel group enters their tavern home and demands their weapon; when they are told the family no longer has it, an officer whips the flat side of his sword across Mr. Meeker's face. In 1776, en route to a Hudson River community to sell cattle, Tim and his father are surrounded and threatened by hostile men with rebel sympathies who are probably cowboys—cattle thieves; they are rescued by a Loyalist Committee of Safety. Attacked again on the way home during a blizzard, Mr. Meeker is captured, although Tim, using a ruse, escapes. (Later, the family learns that Mr. Meeker died of cholera on, unaccountably, a British prisoner ship.) Tim takes on the management of the household and business affairs with his mother, seeing himself suddenly to have achieved adult status. The British enter the community in 1777, taking several prisoners, including a nine-year-old boy, shooting down a messenger, and laying siege to a building. They attack, killing them and beheading a slave; these actions, witnessed by Tim, affect him physically as well as intellectually.



Later that year, the Continentals return and establish an encampment. The culminating event, the arrest and trial of Sam Meeker, occurs. The thieves, who Sam and Tim had chased, accuse Sam of stealing his family's cows. The court-martial goes against him; he is condemned to death by firing squad. General Putnam is steadfast in his decision to use Sam's case as an example for his troops to prevent such pillaging and theft. Putnam denies Mrs. Meeker's and Tim's requests for clemency. Sam's innocence may not be clear to the court or the general—evidence was lacking—but it is clear to the reader. Against this backdrop of rite of passage, this novel focuses on questions of freedom—the sons' freedom from the authority of their father and the colonists' political freedom from the British Crown. Loyalties, competing at personal and political levels, are fraught with tension and hostility. While the novel opens with an eager-to-fight Sam, imbued with patriotic zeal, admired by an envious Tim, an antiwar stance evolves. This may be

deduced by Tim's doubts and eventual rejection and from such comments as these from Mrs. Meeker, a sympathetic character: "War turns men into beasts. It's cheaper to shoot a boy than to feed him" and "Bah, patriotism. Your patriotism has got my husband in prison and one of my children out there in the rain and muck shooting at people and likely to be dead at any minute, and my business half ruined. Go sell your patriotism elsewhere. I've had enough of it." The violent events solidify this impression.

Censorship History

James Lincoln Collier and Christopher Collier, a professor of history at the University of Connecticut and the Connecticut state historian, collaborated in the writing of eight historical novels, most of them set during the Revolutionary War. My Brother Sam Is Dead is the most often challenged; it ranks 12th on the American Library Association's (ALA) "The 100 Most Frequently Challenged Books of 1990–2000." It also placed seventh in the ALA's annual rankings of the top 10 challenged books of 1996 and on the comparable lists of People For the American Way, which ranked it 11th in 1995–96 and 10th in 1994–95. Acclaimed for its literary quality and historical accuracy, it was named a Newbery Honor Book, a Jane Adams Honor Book, and a finalist for a National Book Award, all in 1975.

The two most frequent arguments presented by challengers and occasionally successful censors, often in relation to age appropriateness for elementary school readers, were foul and vulgar or profane and inappropriate language and too much violence. Specific words objected to include dammit, Jesus, damn you, bastard, hell, Goddamn, and son of a bitch. The diversity of these challenges in terms of time and place is widespread, reported from 1983 through 2004 in a range of states, among them California, Georgia, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Kansas, and Colorado. Some typical assertions are the "persistent usage of profanity" as well as references to "rape, drinking, and battlefield violence"; "In our house we do not allow God's name to be used in vain. Since God has been removed from our schools, how can we now speak about God in a derogatory way?" This complaint drew this response: "The literary, political, social, and historical significance outweighed the thirty occurrences of offensive language." Another explained: "We are obviously concerned about the decay in the way we speak to one another and the way we express ourselves. What we're trying to say is that it's not OK." A review committee in Maine countered the language complaint by explaining that the book had "a very strong moral theme, of benefit to students that outweighs the infrequent negative language. . . . It matters that the uses of bad language occur in emotional and difficult times and are not part of the normal speech." The graphic violence complaints refer to but do not often identify the decapitation and the execution scenes. A few complaints object to references to drinking, rape, and antireligious sentiments. A minister's request to ban the book asserted, in addition to obscene language, that it presented "a negative approach to God. . . . This is not about censorship, and it's not about First Amendment rights"; he indicated it was a matter of taste and whether the schools should "endorse the use of profanity." A member of a Florida school board, an air force veteran who was shot down in Vietnam, defended the language as realistic—"portrayal of war included profanity." Direct confrontation with the unorthodox presentation of this war is mostly avoided by challengers. Two examples reflect this concern: In Connecticut, a challenger accused the book of "inflammatory propaganda" and as being "an inaccurate depiction of the Revolutionary War." Another challenger objected to the portrayal of "Americans as barbaric, unfeeling and almost inhumane."

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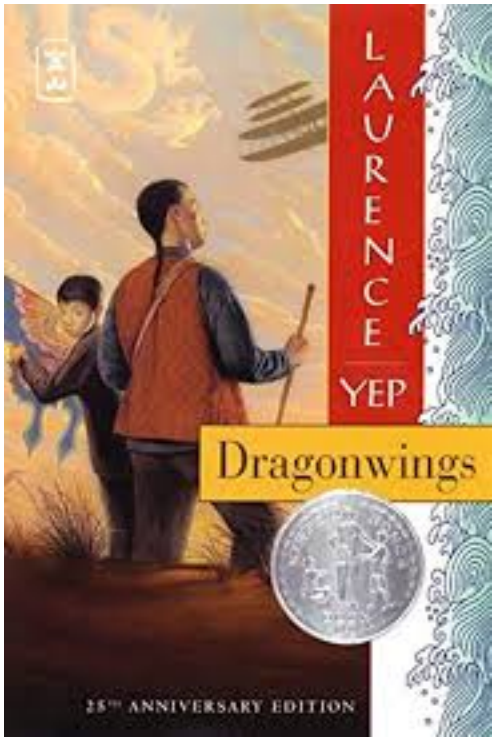
Banned Books Mini Review

DRAGONWINGS

Author: Laurence Yep
Original date and place of publication: 1975, United States
Original publisher: Harper and Row
Literary form: Novel



SUMMARY

Dragonwings is a critically praised, Newberry Honor novel for young adults by Laurence Yep. Yep has written more than 20 books inspired by the Chinese-American immigrant experience and legends of Chinese folk tales. *Dragonwings*, about a boy who emigrates from China to San Francisco in 1905 to join the father he has never met, is a coming-of-age story and a celebration of the courage and industry of the Chinese-American community of the early 20th-century.

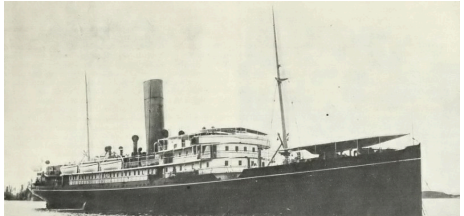
Eight-year-old Moon Shadow lives with his mother and grandmother in a small village in China. One day he receives a letter from his father, who immigrated years before to the Golden Mountain, or America, asking that Moon Shadow sail to San Francisco to join him. Upon Moon Shadow's arrival in the Land of the Demons, as the people of his village refer to the United States, he meets his father. He is brought to the Company of the Peach Orchard Vow, the laundry that serves as the family headquarters in the neighborhood of the Tang people, San Francisco's Chinatown.

He is soon exposed to the difficult living and working conditions of Chinese immigrants. Moon Shadow's own grandfather had been lynched 30 years before by a mob of white demons. Now a brick shatters the laundry window as a racist mob of drunken white men roams through the neighborhood.

His father, who is called Windrider, was known in China as a master kitemaker. He shows Moon Shadow the electrical devices he has invented and recounts the story of how he received the name Windrider. In a former life the father was the greatest physician of all the dragons. His skill at kitemaking is only a remnant of his former powers.

As Moon Shadow grows to love and respect his father, he studies English and begins to learn the strange customs of the American people. After Windrider fights with a member of the criminal brotherhood in Chinatown and kills the man as he is about to shoot Moon Shadow, he and Moon Shadow must leave the Tang neighborhood. They move to rooms in the house of a landlady, Miss Whitlaw, on Polk Street, where Windrider has found work as a handyman. Moon Shadow becomes friends with Miss Whitlaw's niece, Robin, the first non-Chinese child he has ever met. With Robin's help, Moon Shadow learns to read and write English. Moon Shadow and his father begin a correspondence with the Wright brothers on the mechanics of flying machines, and Windrider begins to build large glider models.

By 1906, Windrider is saving money, looking forward to opening his own fix-it shop and thinking of the day when he might be able to bring Moon Shadow's mother over from China. One morning in April, a great earthquake shakes the city. Moon Shadow, his father, Miss Whitlaw, and Robin survive; Miss Whitlaw's well-constructed house is the only one still standing on their street. When fires sweep the



city, they flee by wagon to Golden Gate Park, then to the Oakland foothills, where they make a home in an abandoned barn.

Windrider dedicates his time and resources for the next three years to building *Dragonwings*, his flying machine. He makes a successful test flight, but the plane is destroyed and he is injured when it crash-lands. As his broken bones mend, Windrider and Moon Shadow rejoin the company, moving into its sturdy new building in San Francisco. Finally, Moon Shadow's father sails for China to bring Moon Shadow's mother to America.

Moon Shadow knows that many problems and challenges lie before him, but "I knew I could meet them," he says, "with the same courage with which Father had pursued his dream of flight and then given it up, or the same courage with which Mother had faced the long separation from us."

Censorship History

Dragonwings was inspired by historical accounts of Fung Joe Guey, a young Chinese man who improved upon the Wright brothers' original airplane design and flew in the hills over Oakland on September 22, 1909, for 20 minutes before a mishap brought his biplane down.

In *Dragonwings*, the author wished to breathe life into the dry historical facts of the experience of Chinese immigrants. "At the same time," Yep wrote, "it has been my aim to counter various stereotypes as presented in the media. . . . I wanted to show that Chinese-Americans are human beings upon whom America has had a unique effect."

Because the novel is written from the point of view of a recently arrived boy, Moon Shadow refers to write Americans as "demons." The Tang word for demon can mean many kinds of supernatural beings, Moon Shadow explains. "A demon can be the ghost of a dead person, but he can also be a supernatural creature, who can use his great powers for good as well as for evil, just like the dragons."

Such allusions to the customs and beliefs of the Chinese immigrants portrayed in *Dragonwings* led to an attempt to ban the book in May 1992. Sylvia Hall, a Pentecostal minister, approached the Apollo-Ridge School Board in Kittanning, Pennsylvania, to ask that *Dragonwings* be removed from the eighth-grade curriculum. She objected to the use of the word demon in the book, references to reincarnation and other allusions to Eastern religion and what she described as content relating to the occult and satanism.

When the school board rejected Hall's request to ban the book by a vote of 9-0, she took her case to court, asking for an injunction prohibiting the use of the book. She told the court, "There may be children who will commit suicide because they think they can be reincarnated as something or someone else."

Hall contended the reading of the book in a public school violated the First Amendment prohibition against the establishment of religion. *Dragonwings,* she argued, advanced the religion and beliefs of Taoism and reincarnation. It also promoted the religion of secular humanism by implying that people can achieve their goals without God's intervention.

In a September 15, 1992, ruling, Armstrong County judge Joseph Nickleach denied the request to ban the book. In his opinion, Nickleach wrote: "The fact that religions and religious concepts are mentioned in school does not automatically constitute a violation of the establishment clause." He stipulated that the book was used for a purely secular purpose and that neither the book nor the teachers who taught it promoted a particular religion as the only correct belief or even the preferred belief. He found that the complainant failed to sustain her burden of proof that Apollo-Ridge School District violated the U.S. Constitution by assigning the book to be read in school.

FURTHER READING

American Library Association. *Newsletter on Intellectual Freedom*, 42, no. 1 (January 1993): 18.

Yep, Laurence. *Dragonwings*. Afterword by Laurence Yep. New York: Scholastic, 1990.

Banned Books Mini Review